

From Film Image to History

The Lighting-up of Golden-Age Cinema in Mexico.

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La diversité des témoignages historiques est presque infinie. Tout ce que l'homme dit ou écrit, tout ce qu'il fabrique, tout ce qu'il touche peut et doit renseigner sur lui.

Marc Bloch

Judging from all the evidence we have, it appears that History must start again to look at aspects of the human existence in their time and must open up to the realm of imagination, of affectivity, and of mental attitudes; to put it differently, it must work from a new basis of sensibility and with different questions, with novel sources and themes that permit us to learn more about what happens in the public and private spheres, about the exceptional and the common, about the real and the symbolic, about social practices and about the dominant ideology, as well as the links that connect those divergent fields. Such an approach presupposes a particular attitude toward historical evidence.

Like many other documents, ancient films give us material for reflecting upon a reality that no longer exists. They offer us leads rather more than evidence, but they do this so powerfully that the historian must confront innumerable difficulties that arise when we study them.

Can the cinema provide a source for the historians? And in this case, what information does it deliver and how can we recover it? It is in this way that we might formulate the guiding question of this article, whose aim it is to identify the perspectives offered to the historian by fictional film, and by the Mexican cinema during its "Golden Age" in particular, that formidable industry which is represented in the productions of the 1940s and early 1950s, on

account of their economic weight and of the influence that they exerted on the shaping and expression of ideas in this epoch.

I

The seventh art form opens for the historian a diverse field of investigation. One can examine the history of cinema, i.e., analyze, interpret and attempt to explain the process of film-making in its relations with the general context and its temporal setting. Film production has commonly been characterized as a "dream factory." Seen in this way, the object of analysis might be a factory that produces these dreams and allows us to differentiate various fields of study relating to production, distribution and the use of film strips. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery have divided the history of the cinema into four major fields that to this day represent the main axes of research: aesthetic, technological, economic, and social.¹

However, it is also possible to start from the products in order to study documentary or fictional film. The documentary claims to be an objective account of a particular theme in cinematographic language, whereas the fictional film rests on a product of the imagination that may or may not be based on a real event. Both cinematographic genres are cultural constructions: they do not open a window to the world in order to present it as it is; rather what they put forward is an interpretation. A film organizes the images of which it is made up by means of dialogues, of music, commentaries, camera movements, etc.

Even if its original purpose is to distract, fictional cinema nevertheless contributes to the configuration of a society by transmitting social practices, attitudes, and concepts that are being transformed and/or reinforced in the process. In certain cases it can be the object of an explicit manipulation by groups that hold power. As always and as with non-film sources, the historian must read them in a particular way. To quote Bloch, the historian is dealing "with indices that the past, without premeditation, drops along its road."²

In a general way, historical research has given credit most freely to documentary cinema whose images portray important events

or at least are conventionally considered as such. These principles can also prevail in fictional cinema to the extent that one gives first priority to concrete objects that appear on the screen: we are being surprised to recognize the streets, the buildings in our town, the dress of our mothers and grand-mothers. It has even been pointed out in what way the images constitute an excellent document in the musical sphere. Mexican cinema, for example, offers a veritable catalogue of rhythms and songs.

The fictional stories of which film makes a spectacle of lights and shadows, originating in serialized novels and romances by contrast have generated a certain mistrust because they appear to deal with less serious matters which, it is thought, cannot replace rigorous work.

Fictional works relate an invented history. Story-telling is tantamount to cutting, to a selection of elements that are to be put on the screen. Cultural facts come into play in the choice of anecdotes and their organization, in how they transform themselves into indices that provide access to an understanding of certain aspects of society. The historian finds him- or herself faced with a constructed discourse and not with brute reality. This is also true of the documentary, even if it gives a stronger impression of veracity. Fictional films appear even more obviously manipulated because they do not appeal to objectivity, but to the imagination.

Nevertheless, the fact that cinema tells fictive histories does not mean that it teems with inaccuracies; as Jean-Louis Comolli has put it, a work is a web of fiction; consequently, to the extent that it is not a pure illusion, but a delusion that is recognized as such, it must be taken to be true.³

Cinematographic art exerts a special fascination on account of its language that is close to that of the world of dreams; it is a language that enlarges the notion of time and space and gives the viewer an illusion of liberty, ubiquity, and omnipotence. It represents a system of visual and sound signals that assume meaning through the mediation of the sequence, of order, of repetition, of the centering and movement of the camera. Film images put together the visual with the aural (noises, voices and music) in a special darkened and quiet environment where a number of people sit alone with their fantasies. The film's language does not appeal to the intellect, but to feelings, to sensibility. If the seventh art form is closer to day-dreaming the analogies that connect it

with dreams are striking. It expresses and speaks to the desires that are common to an entire society and this explains at the same time the enthusiasm that it generates.

Cinematographic art carries within it the ambiguities of its origins. Benefiting from the progress made in photography, the film camera was invented as a scientific attraction. The Lumière brothers did not themselves believe in the future of their invention. But before long the cinema acquired an aura that linked it to imagination, to the universe of dreams, to magic, and experienced an unusual success. The seventh art form passed -to take up an expression by Edgar Morin—"from the cinematograph to the cinema."⁴ Also because of its images that constitute its subject matter, cinematographic art combined two kinds of opposite situations: on the one hand, it courts certainty, a sense of "I have seen this with my own eyes; it is true" that goes back to the scientific notions of the Lumière brothers and that is borne out more than ever; on the other, since Georges Méliès, the images return to a sense of "don't believe anything; this is merely a game of shadow and light." For the historian a middle way seems necessary.

Except for certain authors, like Jean-Paul Sartre, for whom the "essential feature of a mental image is a certain pattern whose object it is to be absent at the same time as it is present,"⁵ an image is never simple; it is always a symbol connected through it even to the sacred that invites contemplation. Not without reason are images associated with religion, and how many times have they been censured or had a ban imposed upon them. Furthermore, the film image has an even more powerful reality effect because it is moving. This turns it into a spectacle, into an element of mass culture, shaped, at the same time, by commercial interests and by the influence that it exerts because it is seen as a preferred instrument of the dominant ideology.

The cinema provokes reactions that are different from those aroused by reading. The image impacts on feelings and, in the darkened theater, all of us grow less critical. It is for this reason that we weep with so much ease. The cinema touches the less conscious realms of the psyche. The spectator cannot stop for reflection or turn a page to reconsider a passage. The historian finds himself confronted with unique material, with a document from which he tries to draw evidence and whose constitutive substance he must not neglect.

Marc Ferro has expressed indignation because "it is understood of fictional film that it merely dispenses dreams, as if the dream were not part of reality, as if the imaginary were not one of the motors of human activity."⁶ It is precisely the illusory material of fictional film that provides access to information of a different character, and on this level "the image of the real can also be as true as in a document."⁷ In reality that other document requires interpretation and hence a research procedure that does not distort its meaning.

In semiotic perspective, films have been studied as object in themselves, by focusing on language and on the connections between its constitutive parts, by isolating the productions from the contexts that produced them, and, from a psychoanalytical perspective, film strips have been considered as an expression of an "unconscious collective" that brings to light a psychic structure deemed to be eternal and universal.

All these positions seem insufficient with regard to history. One has tried to move away from the specificity of the source, of the film images, in so far as these become integrated into a context that gives them their character without separating the latter from its reality nor, in human times, from social processes.⁸

A cinematographic work is hence a cultural creation. It is part and parcel of a social system; it is historic and inscribed into a particular age and space. Historicizable and intelligible at the same time, it is a vehicle of possible knowledge. In order to gain access to this knowledge, the discipline of History proves to be fundamental as the one that specifies the meaning of film strips in the complex, ambiguous, and fluid environment of their world, their times, and the times that reveal themselves in them without losing sight of the very substance of their subject matter, i.e., imagination.

II

To write History on the basis of these materials that, while appearing tangible, are less than credible, requires the conceptualization of the gaze and of a method of approach; it requires the formulation of problems and questions that are not given, that emerge from each case study since the reality that the historian tries to

understand does not impose itself on his mind on account of the nature of the evidence.

Like all cultural creations, films combine aspects of external reality with fictive ones. The historian will have to distinguish those elements that are part of objectivity from those that are part of invention. Such an approach allows us to understand certain levels of a historical moment. Film analysis demands a choice from among a variety of themes (social classes, ethnic groups, professions, male and female status etc.). But it is not just a question of the ideas that are raised by the chosen theme. For example, we do not have access to real workers, but to their representation. Work on film documents makes these limitations obvious which is also true for the history that draws from other sources.

At this point it must be stressed: the cinema is not history; its content must be decoded. The major risk is that homologies are being established between films and the context in which they are being produced. The cinema is not a copy of the world before us. It is constituted to reveal something. "A film is neither a history nor a duplication of the real inscribed in cellulose; it is a social production."⁹ The historian does not uncover, does not reproduce pre-existing objects; he constructs his familiar objects on the territories which he explores. The source as such does not explain the society that produces the cinematic realization but opens up avenues for the attempt to get there. According to Martin Jackson, the cinema can only offer a limited vision, a fleeting image, always incomplete and sometimes deceptive; but it is something that, if utilized at the opportune moment, provides the social science specialist with valuable information about the culture and the great ideas of a particular society.¹⁰ But how can we access those "great ideas of a particular society?"

Roger Chartier, whose historical works deal with the reading and with the texts of the Ancien Régime in France and Spain, has introduced a concept of representation that seems to us to be appropriate to our theme. According to him, each text has an organization and a principle of classification that are appropriate to it, that assure its transmission and that allow it to acquire its final significance—one which takes shape through the interpretation that the reader gives it in accordance with his social practices. Cultural history hence defines itself as a history of the construction of signification and rests on the tension that is expressed in

the inventive capacity of individuals or of interpretive communities, resulting from the constraints, norms, and conventions that limit what it is possible to think and say.¹¹ While the works of Chartier focus on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the scope of his approach makes it possible for it to be applied to other cases, and particularly to cinema.

If a film does not open a window to the world outside, if it is merely a representation, it is not sufficient to know what is being said; we must also learn who says it and to whom, why and when, and from what vantage point the film is received, what it means for different people. We need to know its organization just as much as that which connects it with its context.

In order to analyze the representation that makes up the cinema, it is essential to differentiate between the different stages of film making: production, distribution, exploitation, and consumption by the public. All these impact on the dynamic that is produced and all of them must be taken account of in the analysis. These diverse elements may constitute points that are crucial for an understanding of film strips. Is the film privately or publicly financed; do the producers have funds at their disposal or not? Are equipment and skilled technicians available? Are the distributors national or international companies? Is enterprise a financial affair, etc.?

If regarded as a basic element in the construction of models that guide the roles that men play in the real world, the Mexican "Golden-Age" cinema offers a special example. If it strikes an entire epoch by its flashing splendor,¹² it remains, despite its development, in a constant state of crisis, affected by social conflicts, scarcity of technical and material means, the dominance of market forces, etc. This state of affairs came about in order to make films quickly, to try to reduce costs, and to obtain a fast return in investments and to save on directors, technicians, and actors. Films are made in a hurry, with the obvious aim to entertain without dealing with major problems. Improvisation is visible on the set and the influence, which the technicians on the film-making team exert everyday on the way the images are worked out, is palpable. The state supports the Mexican film industry and introduces protectionist measures; but it is private individuals who look for—and derive—commercial benefit by taking up themes that are accepted by the public and by establishing their politics step by step and without careful study of the market. The

production of churros—poorly made or undistinguished films—thus assumed an important place in the national industry.

Because of this improvisation, filmstrips expressed in an advantageous way the traditional forms of Mexican culture and the central concerns of its society. Often bad Mexican films were those that provided most information. Less demanding, they made more openly visible a large number of notions of life. The criterion of quality was not of primary importance to those productions, the less so as it was for the entertainment of the common people who went to the cinema. Of course, the importance of these films was not comparable to that of movies made by the North American or European industries in this or other periods.

This insight allows us to revise a concept of cinema that sees it as a vertical instrument of the dominant ideology, wide-spread during the 1960s and 1970s when the seventh art form was thought to be alienating, a source of a number of evils in society, and when the idea was put forward to turn film into a consciousness-raising instrument for resolving other perennial problems. In the case of Mexican “Golden-Age” cinema it seems important to nuance this view and to analyze the connections between ideology, mentality, and popular culture.

The screen reflects in large measure the mentalities of the men and women who made the films. The concept of mentality revolves around a body of ideas that are neither conscious nor systematic as conversely those of the dominant ideology are. It refers to the realm of emotions, of feelings, of values and it translates itself in behavior, rituals, practices, and attitudes, in adhering to or rejecting something, often without apparent consistency. Mentality is collective (though not homogeneous), repetitive, and it is not primarily ruled by thought.¹³ Its study can be enriched by the idea of representation as developed by Chartier and one that permits to avoid the standardization of a given society. It is the task of the historian to focus his attention on textual forms or images that convey the expression in such a way that the analysis of the dynamic interaction between producer and consumer provides him with the means to consider 1) reality as constructed in contradictory manner by divergent groups; 2) the forms in which practices shape the social identity, and 3) the institutionalized and objectivized forms that make the representation visible.¹⁴

Furthermore, the dominant ideology is not seen as a rigid structure within which a ruling class imposes, in vertical fashion, explanations, beliefs, and values by using the means of communication as carriers of messages set up to inoculate the masses; this is not a closed vision of the world, but a space in which those themes are being formed, a dynamic substratum that is common to the society as a whole, cut across by different types of information, with diverse, cultural products, a base on which to amass resources in order to arrive at a consensus and perhaps then, at hegemony.

The idea of using film images purely for political ends, as an all-powerful instrument of the dominant ideology arose from the conviction that it possessed great magnetic force.¹⁵ As a matter of fact, it is necessary to call this belief into question and to relativize it in the sense that it presupposes a particular political system and an array of technical and economic means that are not always available.

On the other hand, human beings find innumerable ways of developing a very personal reading of the messages they receive, depending on their social positions with its divergent parameters of class, gender, generation, ethnicity, religion, or profession. The mentality of the individuals reinterprets the dominant ideology by departing from its original meaning; this ideology is thus filtered through plurality of social practices, traditions, customs, and habits prevailing throughout society. Culture is constructed through management, resistance, and acceptance; it establishes a way of life.¹⁶ It is also in this manner that the cinema impacts on the public.

Consequently, the analysis of the relations between dominant and subordinate groups assumes a less one-dimensional aspect and culture turns out to be a field of tension rather than a receptacle of images and/or information. The subjects form themselves through a process that allows them to relate discourse to practice. According to William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, the cultural sphere is neither a simple outgrowth of socio-economic reality nor a purely ideological phenomenon; nor is it equivalent to some pre-existing metaphysics: rather it is the realm in which social conflicts are deeply felt and evaluated.¹⁷

Popular culture does not appear as eroded by mass culture, not least because the latter is not solely conceived of as a manipulation of a public; a public that is hardly thought anymore of as being passive.¹⁸ Resistance and conformism can be found simulta-

neously. Tradition and innovation coexist; they are not opposites in any clear-cut manner.

The historian is in the position of analyzing the linkages between the different levels because, far from remaining abstract, the ideas take on concrete shape in their representations.

The Mexican cinema does not transmit a unique image to a unique audience, but rather numerous images to numerous audiences. It is nevertheless evident that certain discourses are recurrent. As regards certain themes, such as the construction of gender roles,¹⁹ we can discover similarities between key concepts in divergent cinematographic concepts:²⁰ the *rancheras* comedies (representing typically Mexican films that blend passionate love scenes with gun-fire and chansons), slap-stick, drama, or mystery—all have certain ideas in common. This coincidence is remarkable: the reels establish a dialogue on the basis of a coherent set of values from one film to the other and with regard to society, which is even more surprising insofar as no official code exists that governs the films' content in any detail. There is hence reason to assume that the ideas that are being expressed are those of the epoch. They are being shared by producers and audiences and they are put on the screen on account of a partial improvisation that characterizes film productions.

Mexican cinema has an organization and is guided by principles of classification that are unique to it and that derive, of course, also from the specificity of the film's language—"the dream world," though they cannot measure themselves with other cinematographic traditions, not even with those, like Hollywood, that exert a visible influence upon it. Contrary to appearances, the dreams are not completely free. Every society leaves a potential field to imagination. The formulation of desires and of fantasies remains confined to the individual.²¹

As Pierre Sorlin put it: "A film or a film series define a way of conceiving social relationships and of making them intelligible through the manner in which they select objects, personages and relational systems, put them into images, and associate them, i.e., through their construction. ... The cinema does not open a window to the world; rather it filters and rearranges certain of its aspects. ... But the film—partially dominated by the context, as it is—projects this world to the extent that it copies it. Films are

propositions about society; for the historian of the cinema this means that he needs to understand how these propositions are constructed.”²² Historical research is being handed a key here: the cinema is a proposition; films are not “slices from real life; they are discourses that have been constructed according to strict rules.”²³ Those who make films borrow objective elements from external reality in order to construct a model; they select the “visible” that they perceive and reorganize by creating a parallel universe, an imagined construction of the world. Film language (camera movement, music, cutting, etc.), cinema’s narrative methods, the creation of stereotypes that is specific to it, turn film strips into another form of reality.

For this reason it is important to understand the configuration of film language. Thus resorting to stereotypes,²⁴ that can frequently be found in the interplay of shadow and light, is very widespread in Mexican cinema. The personages of the period under consideration here do not embody psychologies, but are functional,²⁵ and, what is more, do so in stereotypical ways. For the narrative to emerge, one personage calls for its opposite. The strong person requires a weak counterpart, the good requires the bad; man is juxtaposed to woman. And yet across the stereotypes and roles there is always a system of values: who are the strong and/or weak ones? What is it that succeeds and what is it that fails? What differentiates townspeople from the inhabitants of the countryside?

Those who make films construct a model of the “visible” that explicitly integrates what they regard as adequate and pertinent; they, too, filter what is and what they see, those ideas that seem evident and that, at the same time, do not look at or declare themselves, that ensemble of values to which one remains blind.²⁶

Every film carries an explicit content that does not conjure away other, implicit ones that are part of the story and that hide in innuendo—these obvious ideas to which we are blind. Sorlin distinguishes between these two types of content by calling them history and story respectively.²⁷ The history is the sequence of anecdotes, the very framework of the narrative, the mold which contains the story that emerges from the image. History and story are often at variance in the sense that films ordinarily present distinct contents and that we see in one image after the other situations that nuance or contradict what is apparently being

formulated. For this reason it is not sufficient just to read the script; we must study the actual strip of a given work. Thus the history of a film can show that prostitutes are "evil" women, but in the case of Mexican cinema there may be a hint of pain or kindness, a particular undertone, such as a propensity to self-sacrifice and self-denial, that transmit a dual message through which the prostitute becomes "good." In "Golden-Age" films, the history generally responds to the dominant moral order and the story allows elements of social practice to filter through.

Thus, a film brings to light, in a complex and contradictory manner, the sensitive areas of a society, the outline of conceptions that are appropriate for each historical moment, be it in terms of the dominant ideology or mentality or be it in that which is represented as respectable as well as that which is lived and worked out explicitly or implicitly, for: "Film has the effect of deconstructing what several generations of statesmen, thinkers, jurists, managers, or professors had successfully arranged in a nice equilibrium. It destroys the double that every institution, every individual constructs vis-à-vis society. The camera reveals their actual workings; it says more about everyone than he will want to display. It unveils the secret; it shows the reverse side of a society, its lapses."²⁸

And the public understands these lapses to the extent that it operates with the same cultural code, even if this is not manifest. Thus, confronted with the screen, it creates its own processes of adhesion and rejection, its own personal interpretation of what it observes; it takes note of certain objects while ignoring others. The viewers are more sensitive to inaccuracies relating to topics that they are familiar with; but they freely accept fantasy in respect of themes that they do not know.²⁹ That is why all films provide room for so many different interpretations.

The mechanism of "projection-imagination" lies at the heart of the fascination with film. There are different ways to set aside one's desires, aspirations, obsessions, or one's fears, but also of identifying with what one sees and of assimilating it. The tragedy allows to transfer one's pain, one's ideals to someone else and recover in turn that which is valued in the other as a personal aspiration. The cinema responds to needs, needs that are "all imagination, all dream, all magic, all aesthetic; needs that practical life cannot satisfy."³⁰

Commercial imperatives make it necessary to create identification and transference, i.e., to make films in such a way that the viewer can recognize himself in it, but also that he has the opportunity to escape or to modify facets of its reality through the mediating effect of imagination.³¹ If a film disappoints that double expectation, it will be an economic fiasco.

A mistake that the historian may make in the analysis of film is to confuse the representation of desired elements with those that are lived, those that create identification or transference. To avoid this, it is important to be well familiar with the epoch in which the film was made and with the subject that is being addressed. To give an illustration: in the histories, the family appears like a world of purity; an ideal to which everyone aspires; a source of peace and order. This is the model of modern society during the 1940s. Meanwhile, in the story, the melodramas tried hard to show the problems they contained, the pain it produced so that, in an oblique and subtle fashion, that which appears to be exalted, turns into an object of criticism; in this way the viewer of this kind of cinema (sprung from popular milieus where the normal family commonly does not exist and where teenage mothers and abandoned wives abound) can comfort himself with a lack that he has been taught to regret.³²

Pierre Sorlin has drawn three principal axes for undertaking film analysis: 1) the explicit and implicit relations that are enshrined in the fictive universe of the film, 2) the implicit connections with the wider environment, and 3) the relations between the public and the screen.³³ Thus the first level would demonstrate the importance of the mother in Mexican melodramas; the second axis would suggest the absence of the father that gives the mother a preponderant role in the household; the third level would speak to an audience for whom the appearance of a celibate or abandoned mother as head of the household is a common experience. The history is told on the first axis, but the public understands what remains unspoken in terms of its own reality off-screen.

The double messages and the hidden faces of an image make it possible for the public to identify without on each occasion doing violence to the ideals that remain the indispensable reference-point, the yardstick to be held up, and the lesson to be learned. These ideals privilege transference and desire. One might imagine, for example, that in exalting the maternal role, the mother in

flesh and bones is accorded in the cinema a recognition that no-one will give her in real life.

Cinematographic art establishes a connection between its producers and its audiences.³⁴ The producers select fragments from the world around them that they then organize in terms of their own life, after which the gaze of each of the viewing publics operates in a similar manner. The screen appears as a hyphen between the producers and the viewers because it demonstrates a way of life. In large measure this explains the success of the Mexican cinema, independent of its quality. The audiences understand what remains unspoken in the scripts because they share it with those who made the film. In this way the cinema expresses the secret levels of a culture, those levels that are not always accessible to scholars. For this reason film constitutes a historical source and, what is more, an attractive one.

The works, the films do not have a unique, stable, universal, and set meaning, but multiple ones that emerge from a dynamic interaction between proposition and reception. The makers may well try to endow the film with a given significance; the viewer will go beyond this. The public is also heterogeneous and pluralistic. Films will be viewed differently depending on whether one lives in the countryside, in a large village, or in a city; depending on whether one is rich or poor, laborer or peasant, young or old, man or woman. It is this which contributes to defining film genres and exerts an influence even on the circuits of commercialization, since the different theaters are geared to particular audiences.

Film analysis from a historical perspective assumes that the expert specifies the concrete elements that, depending on each topic or genre, open up the path to a world that both film and public share. The task is to understand what Martín Barbero has called the “mediations”—a term that comprises the ensemble of operations through which the practices of mass culture seize hold of “popular” culture³⁵ in order to take it back on its own terms. These are the means by which identification is produced. Language, for example, represents a classic mediation in Mexican cinema. Particular ways of speaking are being recreated in our film art: the intonation, the ready-made sentences, the play with words and, on a second stage, the coarse language.³⁶ As the film producer Alejandro Galindo has reported, it was customary to sit in a café in order to hear people talk and to imitate them: “As the

ordinary public saw itself reflected on the screen, it was impossible to imagine how it would respond. It was really touching.”³⁷

Through an interpretation of film materials and by asking appropriate questions we can try to write a history that focuses on the mechanisms of a society, on the connections between the world and its representations. One likes to imagine a history that is more “physiological” than “anatomical” that does not exhaust itself in the description of isolated topics, but will pay attention to their functioning and their interconnections.

As to these connections, those existing between the world and the times should be highlighted at this point. It is a major strength of the historical approach that it brings out multiple times and their rhythms. When it comes to periodizations, it is important to focus on those of the cinema but also of the society that produces it and on those of the case being studied. In the 1940s, for example, the country experienced a process of rapid change while maintaining poles of continuity. The ideal therefore is to shape a modern urban society while two thirds of the population lived on agriculture and while those who populated the cities had moved there only recently. Traditions, customs, and mentalities changed slowly within this complex and dynamic situation, according to a rhythm that is not synchronic, and the films produced show some glaring dephasings. They arise, for instance, if one idealizes the cities and modern life, on the one hand, and, on the other, criticizes the individualism that undermines the spirit of community and family;³⁸ if one praises the progress and force of capitalism, on the one hand, and, on the other, fundamental values that remained anchored in religion. The construction of an image results from economic production, art, popular culture, the dominant ideology, and mentality and depends, *inter alia*, on scientific progress and technological advances in such a way that we must take account of these different parameters without levelling them by examining, for each topic, their particular intersections: the study of the role of medicine in film³⁹ will not be understood in the same way as that of violence of which women are the victims.⁴⁰

The surprise that creates an anecdote in us also constitutes an element of importance. Something that seems strange to us indicates to us that we are probably faced with a shift in ideas or in manners and customs. Conversely, it is possible that we do not perceive what looks familiar; for us it is in the order of things

because it is integrated into our culture that may well have common features with that of fifty years ago. Although history is his final purpose, the scholar remains a spectator and, with the screen before him, can be fascinated by it as such. This is a genuine risk in this field of study.

In conclusion it may be said that the cinema is a business that produces goods that must be saleable. It is, or can be, an art form that depends on an industry; and for us it is a source that brings out the ideas, desires, and beliefs of those who produce films and those who watch them. If the film source to which we have access provides numerous materials, it is not as such history; it requires an interpretation. The task is to elaborate working hypotheses as well as a research procedure that allows us to observe the document from all its angles; that is to say through what it says, but also through what it remains silent about. We must interrogate ourselves, be mistrustful, record what is present as well as what is absent; we must confront the evidence with other testimonies, with other historical materials from the same historic moment. The study of audience needs (identification and transference) and of cinematographic procedures (history and story, mediations) gives us access to certain relations that exist between a social model and actual practice and allows us to see culture as a play of forces which it is worth not to separate too strictly for analytical purposes. The screen ceases to be a receptacle of images that are more or less coherent in themselves in order to become the locus of expression within a complex field of tensions.

The study of film images from a historical perspective is still in its infancy and there are many things still to be more sharply focused. Nevertheless, the cinema captivates through the avenues it opens up to the understanding of certain powers that have animated the lives of men and women during a relatively recent past. For all these reasons, the seventh art form calls for the attention of the historian, and the fruits of this encounter will be full of promise.

Notes

1. *Film History. Theory and Practice* (New York, 1985).
2. *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien* (Paris, 1993, first publ. 1949), 108.
3. Cited in: M. de Orellana, *Imágenes del pasado* (Mexico, UNAM-CUEC), No. 7, 16.
4. *Sociologie du cinéma* (Paris, 1984), 399.
5. Quoted in: E. Morin, *Le Cinéma ou l'Homme imaginaire* (Paris, 1956), 31.
6. M. Ferro, *Analyse des films. Analyse de sociétés* (Paris, 1976), 12.
7. Idem, *Cinéma et Histoire* (Paris, 1977), 128.
8. For Ferro it is important to "leave the image, the images; not merely to look in them for illustrations, confirmation or rejection of another meaning, i.e., that of the written tradition; to consider images in this way means an end to making reference to other meanings to gain a better understanding of them." *Ibid.*, 102.
9. P. Sorlin, *Sociologie du cinéma. Ouverture pour l'histoire de demain* (Paris, 1977), 200.
10. Cited in J. Romaguera and E. Rimbau, *La Historia y el Cine* (Madrid, 1983), 14-15.
11. See his "Histoire intellectuelle et histoire des mentalités. Trajectoires et questions," in: idem, *La Sensibilité dans l'histoire* (Saint-Pierre-de-Salerno, 1987).
12. In 1934 some 52 million tickets were sold for events like cinema, theater, corridas, cock fights, sports, and fun fairs, of which 70 percent were for movies and 22.5 percent for theater. In 1947 the total was 115 million, of which 92.4 percent were for cinema and 1.6 percent for theater. See J. Iturriaga, *La Estructura social y cultural de Mexico* (Mexico, 1951), 206-7.
13. Roger Chartier has defined the contents of thought as an ensemble of "conditionnements non sus ou intériorisés qui font qu'un groupe ou une société partage, sans qu'il soit besoin de les expliciter, un système de représentations et un système de valeurs." *Op. cit.*, 17.
14. *El mundo como representación. Historia cultural: entre practica y presentación* (Barcelona, 1992), IX-X.
15. Soviet cinema during the Stalinist period, East German films, and Hollywood war movies have been the object of numerous analytical readings along these lines.
16. Popular culture is seen here as the ensemble of beliefs, ideas, and values that shape the dealings of people in society as well as the objects which are created within a social group. Its development is closely linked to mentalities and daily life. Today, it resorts to mechanisms of massive anxiety which is why it is associated with mass culture.
17. *Memoria y modernidad. Cultura popular en América Latina* (Mexico, 1993), 26.
18. This current of thought was widely accepted during the 1960s, and notably among authors like Adorno, Horkheimer, or Mattelart.
19. We have dealt with this topic in "Mujeres de luz y sombra en el cine mexicano. La construcción masculina de una imagen, 1939-1952" (PhD. thesis, Mexico).
20. We understand by genre an ensemble of films that display a common language, theme, symbols and stereotypes and that thus represent an analytical unity. The foundation of the melodrama in film is the theatrical melodrama which in turn emerged from the serial novel.
21. Marc Bloch wrote in 1941 that "... in the immense fabric of events, of gestures and phrases that compose the destiny of human groups. The individual only sees a small corner, narrowly confined by his senses and his observation;

- because he moreover never possesses the immediate consciousness other than his own mental states." Op. cit., 100.
22. Op. cit., 287.
 23. Ibid., 294.
 24. We are dealing here with a simplification of role characteristics through omission, reduction, or deformation. Once established, stereotypes tend to reinforce themselves, to repeat themselves: they become reified. The use of a standardized, exaggerated, and simplified stereotype has the effect that the public recognises it and identifies with it.
 25. We are not dealing with completely separate beings. They only fulfill a function in the plot, they are the personification of abstract ideas that situate the character in a fixed place in a story which only gathers speed thanks to the actions and the interrelations of all protagonists.
 26. In Paul Veyne's view, every society considers its discourse as something self-evident. It is the task of the historian to restore this importance which renders daily life secretly central to all epochs: this banality or—what comes to the same thing—this strangeness which are unconscious. See F. Ewald, "Una nueva etapa de la nueva historia: entre lo público et lo privado. Entrevista a Paul Veyne," in: *Historias*, 14, 1986, 7.
 27. Op. cit., 162.
 28. M. Ferro, op. cit., 10.
 29. P. Sorlin, op. cit., 36.
 30. E. Morin, op. cit., 117.
 31. A. Tudor, *Cine y comunicación social* (Barcelona, 1974).
 32. J. Tuñón, "La silueta de un vacío: imágenes filmicas de la familia mexicana en los años cuarenta," (in press).
 33. Op. cit., 156-57.
 34. We refer to all those who produce a work, from the script-writer to the editor, film crew, and director.
 35. J. M. Barbero, "Memoria narrative e industria cultural," in: *Comunicación y cultura*, 10, 1993, 119.
 36. A. De Los Reyes, *Medio siglo de cine mexicano, 1896-1947* (Mexico, 1987), 164-77.
 37. Conversation with A. Galindo, *Testimonios del cine mexicano. Cuadernos de la Cineteca Nacional* (Mexico, 1975), Vol. I, 103.
 38. J. Tuñón, "La ciudad actriz: la image en el cine mexicano, 1940-1955," in: *Historias*, 27, 1991-92, 189-97.
 39. Idem, *Instrumento de Dios. Manos de hombre* (in press), XVIII.
 40. Idem, "Entre lo natural y lo monstruoso: violencia y violación en el cine mexicano de la edad de oro," in: P. Bedello et al., *Estudios de género y feminismo*, Vol. I (Mexico, 1989), 57-67.